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Review of RADICAL POLITICAL ECONOMICS

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REVIEW OF RADICAL POLITICAL ECONOMICS

Aims and Scope

The *Review of Radical Political Economics* promotes critical inquiry into all areas of economic, social, and political reality. As the journal of the Union for Radical Political Economics, the Review publishes innovative research in political economy broadly defined including, but not confined to, Marxian economics, post-Keynesian economics, Sraffian economics, feminist economics, and radical institutional economics. We are actively seeking submissions concerned with policy, history of thought, economics and the environment, and lesbian and gay political economy. The *Review* reflects an interdisciplinary approach to the study, development, and application of radical political economic analysis to social problems.

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Disciplined Minds: A Critical Look at Salaried Professionals and the Soul Battering System that Shapes their Lives

Jeff Schmidt's *Disciplined Minds: A Critical Look at Salaried Professionals and the Soul Battering System that Shapes their Lives* is a rallying cry to dissatisfied professionals and disillusioned students to organize and reshape the system that is stifling them.

Schmidt argues with conviction that the process of selecting and schooling professionals is by its nature a means to weed out potential troublemakers. Various stages of the process of professional training, most notably the qualification exam, are interpreted as "political" rather than "technical" tests that are designed to reward those that demonstrate ideological obedience.

The study is split into three portions. The first outlines the passive nature of the contemporary professional, the second attributes this nature to the selection process, and the third discusses alternatives to the present system. Throughout the book, Schmidt (who has a Ph.D. in physics, and 20 years experience editing a physics journal) draws on his knowledge of industrial and academic research in physics in the United States. At first sight, this appears an odd choice. Nevertheless, as Schmidt points out, the lay perception that science is apolitical makes this field a useful vehicle for his argument.

In the first section, Schmidt describes the self-deluded, conservative attitude of the professional class. The author analyzes the difference between how professionals may see themselves and how their actions reveal them to be. For example, he argues that since almost 80 percent of physics R&D is funded by the federal government, "many professors could leave Universities and take jobs in the military without affecting the social or scientific significance of their work." Moving to a military laboratory, however, would take a "big toll on any Universities professor's public image." More broadly, Schmidt takes the "timid professional" to task for projecting a liberal image, and yet failing to act outside the interest of the status quo within their own field when they have the opportunity.

There are instances, particularly in this section, where the author is guilty of generalizing and drawing conclusions based on limited qualitative findings. Despite this, some of the insights are valuable, and he makes it clear that he is not tarring all with the same brush. One can forgive this approach since the book has a target audience: people who plan to or have entered a given profession in order to make the world a better place. The aim is to alert the idealistic would-be “radical professional” to the potential pitfalls, and ensure that they qualify “intellectually intact,” and apply their egalitarian principles when possible.

The second and strongest section examines how professionals are made, from selection to certification. Schmidt lambastes the educational establishment, and the businesses that have sprung up around it, for the cynical exploitation of those searching for a sense of accomplishment from their work. He asserts that during the training process, professionals are filtered based on their political bias towards the mainstream. This is a continuous process, but there are some striking examples of where it is applied surprisingly early in the training for certain professions. For example, a convincing case is built to support the argument that the qualification exam is often a potent secret weapon precisely because it is seen as impartial and purely technical in nature. The author demonstrates that the exam can be shown to be a “political attitudinal exam” that measures the willingness and ability to carry out tedious and repetitive work that is abstract in nature.

Schmidt discusses how the “backwash effect” necessitates that the curriculum and student approach are dictated by such an exam when it acts as an important hurdle to entering a career path to which so much time and effort has already been devoted. If the exam is limited to superficial tests of abstract rules, then the student will be trained to absorb, accept, and repeat large volumes of abstract theory rather than build critical reasoning skills. In addition, it is demonstrated that many qualification exams also reward those that are willing to learn its “tricks” which can only be garnered by targeted learning. Schmidt illustrates how such an approach will not only reward, but also produce, dependent thinkers.

The author contends that students who pass this process are likely to be the right ideological material for professional-hood. Students who do well in such environments demonstrate that they can obediently do alienating, monotonous work, and these are the skills that their future employers really want. Therefore, the “backwash effect” originates in the government, corporate, or education job market, and its implications wash back through the education system. It is for this reason that the study focuses on tertiary education as opposed to elementary and secondary school.

Whether you believe in an employer-educational conspiracy or not does not detract from the strength of this argument. Nevertheless, it would be worth examining if this conspiracy does exist. It could just be that university professors are too lazy to change their style, or to change their exam questions. Superficial questions, such as calculations, are easy to set and mark. In addition, it is no secret that the most prestigious universities are centers of research rather than of teaching excellence. Competition ensures that professors qualify in these schools. In the publish or die wars, academics must feel tempted to keep students in the system who will endure endless hours of tedious toil in order to feed them results.

An apparent conspiracy can also be merely a coincidence if both parties have a common interest or agenda. Academics may have an interest in curbing critical thinking, and clearly business has it too. There is a great deal of monotonous work to be done. Much of it does

not require any thought. As Schmidt points out, the professional class could be defined as that doing the work that a machine is currently unable to do. Who better to do this work than a bright-eyed graduate student, who will feel amply rewarded with an opportunity to prove her/his worth. It would be unkind, not to mention dangerous, to produce a master race of socially conscious, free-spirited, independent thinkers if then only to chain them to a desk and an in-tray for 40 years. It is no surprise that employers will look for ideological obedience if they have that luxury.

Schmidt concludes that a qualification process characterized by a combination of long hours, poor diet, stress, faculty politics, and financial pressure serves to focus even the most idealistic students on the qualification process, rather than reflect on their values or reasons for wanting to enter the profession in the first place. Eventually, he claims, the student will seek material compensation for giving up these values. Then begins a self-perpetuating search for material reward to sublimate the compromise on core values, perhaps in the hope that there is some nirvana at the top of the pyramid. As a result, the once idealistic student is gradually molded into a mainstream thinker before getting to a position in the hierarchy where she/he can make a real difference. The alternative is to remain an independent thinker, and bail out or be thrown out before qualification. Through this process, the hierarchy replicates itself.

Schmidt aims his book at professionals who want to make the world a better place. His central question is whether the professional qualification process is designed to produce the professional that will best serve society. His answer is an emphatic no. It could be that the majority of would-be professionals are looking for an escape from the even more tedious work done by their future underlings, and are interested in their own progress, not that of society. Nevertheless, Schmidt argues that the idealist, even if in the minority, must be nurtured.

It is the nature of hierarchy that there is intense competition for each step up. Schmidt has concluded that the competition is resolved by selecting the most ardent disciples of the status quo. He then argues that any organization that feeds on dependent thinking will ultimately fail, because it fails to adapt. The crux of this book, therefore, is whether hierarchical institutions can ever evolve to produce a more progressive egalitarian society. Schmidt concludes that hierarchical systems are fundamentally flawed. This is where a cursory glance outside contemporary U.S. society might have proved illuminating. Among the advanced economies of the world, the United States is distinguished by having the highest ratio of managers and supervisors to workers. For example, this ratio in the United States is almost four times higher than in Sweden. Several studies have shown that there is a correlation between this ratio and the degree of cooperation in management–labor relations. The lesson is that a more inclusive approach to management enables a flatter hierarchy, and this results in a more egalitarian distribution of material wealth. This suggests that the United States is stuck, and that this really may hamper its future ability to adapt and compete. Perhaps those at the top of the tree should start to examine Schmidt's thesis also.

The last section of the book deals with how to survive the ordeal of professional training, and keep your ideals intact, so you can reform the system from within. Schmidt advocates an approach that centers on organizing with like-minded people wherever you can find them. This is a powerful concept since it fights the “divide and conquer” nature of hierarchies. He illustrates his suggestions with individual cases that highlight small but important successes

won from organization and resistance. This section has the most imaginative source material, including the U.S. Army manual *Prisoner of War Resistance*.

Throughout his study, the author avoids a theoretical approach. This will attract criticism from certain academics, but it is obvious that he has done this deliberately. His tenet is based on independent thinking, not the tweaking of existing theory to understand the world's problems. Also, ask yourself whether, after spending 20 years editing a physics journal, if qualifying every statement may be rather less fun than saying what you feel to be true.

This book comes from the heart. Shortly after its publication, Schmidt was fired for putting his rhetoric into action. His employer apparently resented the author's claim that he used his spare time at the office to work on the book, and he was fired after a 20-year tenure. His employer's basis for dismissal was that Schmidt was not "fully engaged" in his duties. This is hard to reconcile with the fact that Schmidt had consistently received satisfactory or above average performance ratings, and that when fired he was 2 months ahead of his objectives. The truth appears to be that Schmidt has been taking his own advice for the duration of his career, and has come into conflict with his employer several times when acting on his conscience. For example, he had pushed for increased employment for minorities. The book must have been the last straw, and an irresistible opportunity to get rid of a troublemaker that had somehow infiltrated his profession.

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The Political Economy of Adult Education and Development

Frank Youngman; London: Zed Books, 2000, 270 pp., \$69.50 (cloth), \$25.00 pb

When I was reading Youngman's book, *The Political Economy of Adult Education and Development*, I had mixed perceptions. On the one hand, it delivers a well-written study aiming to build a comprehensive Marxist theoretical framework to understand the political economy of adult education and development. On the other hand, the volume offers a collection of statements on the state, imperialism, dependency, and the capitalist mode of production (along with class, gender, ethnicity, and race), filtered through the author's framework, somehow nullifying the specific characteristics of his analysis of adult education. In Youngman's view, adult education does not have a life of its own, but is an appendix to either development or imperialism. On the whole, this book provides no conceptual innovations, although it has moments of brilliant analysis when discussing its case study: the history of Botswana's adult education between 1966 and 1991.

There is an overly long and standard review of Marxism as social theory before entering into the specifics of adult education. Youngman rejects critiques from postmodernist and